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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: SP Rally Ends, But Party Vows More to Come

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE TREAT ACCORDINGLY

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: After nearly 48 hours of fiery speeches, traffic congestion and booming music, the opposition Socialist Party's latest protest rally ended on Sunday afternoon. The rally concluded without incident, free of provocations or violence as some had feared. The demonstration was larger and better organized than previous SP rallies, with an estimated 10,000 participants present on Friday night and an estimated 1,500 hundred throughout the weekend. On the demonstration's final day, SP Chairman Edi Rama stated in a speech that the SP will give Prime Minister Berisha ten days to comply with SP demands to open contested ballot boxes from the June parliamentary elections. Rama vowed that if Berisha refuses to open the boxes, the SP will "begin demonstrations in every city" in an effort to force early elections. Several SP members told PolOff on Friday that the real goal of the demonstration was not to cow the GOA but to create the impression for the international community of an Albanian political system in crisis. Many, if not most of the participants were either paid or forced to attend, a standard protest tactic used by both parties. Nevertheless, the SP leader's ability to turn-out a large crowd has enabled him to re-invigorate his message of flawed elections among his SP base while strengthening his hand for the moment in continuing the boycott. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) The rally began on Friday afternoon, with thousands of demonstrators gathering on Skenderbeg Square before marching the half-mile to the Prime Minister's Office, where a large stage had been placed in the middle of Tirana's main street. Leaders from the SP and several other allied parties took to the stage to demand an opening of the ballot boxes and vow a quick end to PM Berisha's second term in office. After several hours of speeches, most of the approximately 10,000 protesters dispersed, leaving behind 500-1000 SP supporters who pitched tents in the street to stay the night. During the day on Saturday and Sunday, speeches by SP leaders were interspersed with pop and folk music performances, giving Tirana's main thoroughfare a more festive than political atmosphere. The demonstration ended on Sunday afternoon following a speech by Edi Rama in which he vowed to use a combination of demonstrations and civil disobedience to force early elections. Throughout the 48-hour rally, a large police presence stood off to the side, watching but not interfering. No clashes or other incidents between SP supporters and police were reported.

3. (SBU) COMMENT: It is too early to tell how this latest demonstration will change the political dynamic. Although viewed as a success by the SP leadership, the demonstration reflected more the SP's organizational abilities than any real public anger towards the government. Several SP MPs, including one firmly in the pro-Rama camp, told PolOff that the real goal of the rally was not to cow the GOA (Rama knows that Berisha will likely not bow to boycotts and demonstrations, a strategy Berisha used himself to little effect when he was opposition leader), but to prove to the international community that the SP is serious about its obstructionist strategy. In terms of playing to the internationals and firing up the SP base, the SP leadership believes that the protest succeeded - something

that will only make Rama and his supporters more determined than ever to carry on with the parliamentary boycott and drive toward early elections.